

Activities Don't Count, so Don't Count Them



By Dick Billows, PMP, GCA

Summary: What kind of results you get from your project team depends on what you assign, how you measure performance and how you reward team members. Do these poorly and you undermine their performance.

A Little Story about Counting

Here are a few illustrations of counting the wrong thing on a customer service improvement project with a scope defined as, "Provide World Class Customer Service that Delights the Customer":

- ❑ A PM measures engineers' performance by the number of lines of code each engineer writes and rewards the engineer with the highest total with a lunch with the CEO.
- ❑ A PM measures trainers' performance with the rating that class attendees give each trainer and the one with the highest rating receives a certificate of appreciation.
- ❑ A PM measures the performance of team members doing a survey of managers by the number of interviews each team member conducts and rewards the one who does the most interviews with public recognition at a status meeting.

What performance do we get from assignments like these? Well, the engineers will write a lot of lines of code and some of it may benefit the customer service division. The trainees will really have a fun time in class but maybe not learn much. The interviewers will conduct a whole lot of interviews but much of the information hurriedly gathered may be useless.

The project manager is counting the activity being performed. What we usually get in this situation is frenzied activity that contributes little of the business value the project should deliver. The project manager most likely did not know what business value was needed from the assignments so they picked the activities because they were handy.

Just Counting Dates

Another form of this counting the wrong thing is when the only metric we count is the completion date. This is usually accompanied by due dates that are plucked from the sky rather than based on the work to be done and the resource availability. What do we get? Team members turn in crappy work on time and then have to spend months fixing it. Often, they don't understand what was expected because the assignment was unclear. Project sponsors drive much of this "date behavior" when all they focus on is the due dates of assignments and the project as a whole. This is not to suggest that the dates are not important; they are. But delivering crap by the due date does not mean the project is a success.

Of course, most project sponsors are accustomed to having projects where there is nothing else but dates that are objectively measurable in the entire project plan. Everything else is vague

subjective statements. So it's not surprising that sponsors like dates; they are objectively measurable and unambiguous. But due dates for an assignment or the project as a whole don't tell the whole story of overall performance of a project.

Having clear objective acceptance criteria for the project as a whole and every deliverable is a best practice. Why don't project managers do a better job of making performance expectations clear? It would benefit team members in terms of the clarity of assignments and benefit executives by providing them with objectively measured check points to measure progress. It would give everyone a clear fix on the business value the project should produce and how it will be measured.

Decomposition: the Way Out of the Activity Trap

If we had a measured business outcome with acceptance criteria that defined the scope we could break it down, decompose it into a measured outcome for the deliverables. This is also a best practice and it would go like this:

- ❑ If the project scope was defined as, "Answer 95% of customer call calls within 3 minutes," we have a clear measured outcome and we can decompose it into its components.
- ❑ Then as we decompose the scope into system deliverables we'd come to the GIU (screen display) that an engineer had to develop. That measured outcome would be "Customer service rep sees 6 months of customer history within 4 seconds of entering the customer's name or number." Note that is an achievement measured in the user's business not the engineer's department. That makes it a whole lot more relevant to the scope than counting lines of code.
- ❑ The trainer would have a different achievement too. The assignment would be "80% of the attendees at the class can answer the top 20 customer questions in 120 seconds or less using the new GUI." Again what we are counting is more relevant to the scope than how good a time the attendees had.
- ❑ The team members doing the interviewing of managers would have a measured business outcome like, "Managers reach consensus on the ten most important customer service problems."

That sounds pretty straightforward. It takes some time and good technique but what we are counting and measuring now is relevant to achieving the project scope. Assignments defined in measured terms like those above make performance expectations clear to the team members before they start work. That makes estimating and tracking much more precise and lets us spot problems early. There are just a couple of key steps.

First, the project manager needs a quantified measure of project success the sponsor accepts. Second, the PM needs solid techniques to decompose the measurable scope into a set of achievements the team has to produce. Decomposing measured achievements down to the level of individual team assignments is not easy but it is well worth the effort.

All the techniques in this article a part of our [Achievement-driven Project Methodology](#) (AdPM™) methodology which we teach in [one-on-one courses](#) over the Internet as well as in-person [seminars for organizations](#).